

JUNQUERA, LEAH, M.F.A. Murmurs from Home. (2021)

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Murmurs from Home is an exploration of relationships tied to land and family through oil paint.

MURMURS FROM HOME

by

Leah Junquera

A THESIS

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Approved by

Jennifer Meanley

Committee Chair

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family and Cason who we lost at the start of this journey.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Leah Junquera has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair Jennifer Meanley

Committee Members Barbara Campbell Thomas

Nicole Scalissi

Michael Ananian

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PREFACE

In the foothills of the Adirondacks, one point nine miles up Benson Road, you take a right at the old red gas pump: at the base of Cathead Mountain exactly half a mile up the dirt road lies my family home. A two-hundred-year-old farmhouse with an open field and view of mountains to the north and south: my great, great uncle's house. My brother and I spent our formative years working on the house renovations before any real heat was added, but the fireplaces were always full. Our roots run as deep as the red pine and maple trees planted there.

The mosquito man said it has the clearest water in the area. More black fly bites, but clearer water to catch frogs and salamanders. We spent more time outside than inside, a magical childhood. My brother and I each had our zones. They were our own special places, bits of the stream we would not let each other enter. Moments for when we needed to play in isolation. We both knew some places were too special to keep to ourselves so we would share: "no man's land". Places enjoyed by the two of us, under the willow where a shrub hid a deep pool, and by the bees where the stream passes between century old pine trees. Between those pine trees purple-colored roots were exposed by the rushing stream creating its own pool. We shared all of those.

My father led me and my brother into the field when I was ten. We walked in grass past my waist, I was trailing behind my brother, always lagging behind plucking tips of the grass. Grass has always made my skin itch; I've never been able to resist trudging through unbothered until the moment I lay still. My father faced the house and the open fields perched just below the potato hills and zucchini plants on the edge of our garden. We sat and waited. My dad told us that day no matter what this land always has to stay in the family. He fought to keep it. It is endless work keeping the house from all of the elements, but this land is so ingrained in who we are. This property needs to stay in the family.

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CHAPTER I: HOME, LAND, AND FAMILY

Murmurs from Home is my exploration of the physical ties to land that are steeped in the complexity of family relationships. My relationship to land is informed by the ties of my family. As children my brother and I were told stories of lost gold hidden in the Adirondacks. Certain hikes and hidden pools were places that we treated like hidden treasure. My parent's property was our own Golconda. It was a perfect childhood; we splashed around in ponds, learned about the woods and trekked up mountains.

My relationship to home is the root of my painting. The further I investigated my relationship to this land, the more I realize paintings can hold two realities. Home is both a place of great joy and comfort, while also being a place of pain and complexity. It holds love for its past and fear for its future. In the most recent work, I am coming to terms with the loss of my control of a space, and the relationships affected by it. The paintings are grounded in both internal space and physical landscape.

CHAPTER II: ACCRETION OF EXPERIENCES

My brother and I learned how to be best friends for each other because we were the only ones at the end of the dirt road. We were each other's playmates during my formative years and we also learned how to be alone in the landscape. There is a Swedish word “ensamhet” which defines “the restorative, relaxing effect of being solitary and thoughtful, but not lonely” and this is how we were (Stilgoe xiii). Through painting, I work on recreating the vibrations felt in these places. Locations where I’m alone and often sitting still, I found the world around me to be in motion and always moving. When I started these paintings, I was mainly focused on a collection of my memories and experiences in the foothills of the Adirondacks. I began this body of work with paintings that were about the accretion of joy felt in these specific places.

When I began my second year, I shifted from representing the locations in their specificity, to focusing on the accretion of time spent within them through abstraction. I explored how to create fleeting memories through paint. It was important to have a variation through my brushstrokes, almost like the droning sound of a nearby beehive. The physicality of the landscape moves and makes noise; like water trickling and wind rushing through, but I also succumb to my memories of these places from the past. They imprint in my mind. I think of how past memories inform present perceptions of the land, creating subsequent murmurs. Forms that create their own syncopation in the space. *She sewed her curtains before the road* was a pivotal painting to start this work (figure 1). It was the first painting where I gave myself permission to depict these sacred spaces. I do not share these places except with a select few. I believed I could never paint about them directly because these places are so ingrained in how I see myself and my family. In this way of painting, memories are reflected by pattern, color and repetitive form. Each grouping of colors or shapes depicts the flux of memory one feels when returning to the same location again and again. These shapes swim away from and with one another, sometimes layering and sometimes remaining isolated. These forms drift in and out on the panel. They hold no laws of gravity or time, contradicting any initial conceptions by existing in an in-between realm between physical paint surface and illusionistic space.

In *The pieces you give, pieces you take* I paint, scrape and draw marks that read as mesh nets on different layers that complicate the figure-ground relationship (figure 2). The cross hatched nets are carved in different colors and applications. The nets are interwoven between different layers in the paint and different temporal realities. This was another pivotal shift: these forms not only suggest the accretion of memories, but how the past is embedded in the future of a place. These memories and experiences are not just floating emotive paint marks. The past is ingrained and recorded in the present. These memories of mine inform how these places are viewed and experienced. This opens up a new way of looking at these spaces, as family history and relationships become part of every layer in the work.

In this work the physicality of paint shifts as well as the materials and application used. In the late fall, I shifted to wood panels anticipating the need for a more durable surface. I started painting on mainly 4'x3' wooden panels. Having a larger scale similar to my body changed the way in which I moved the paint. Hanging vertically, these paintings started to become large enough that I began to see myself in this work. The panels have to endure the physical staining and scraping away of paint. Starting the paintings on the ground I found I could react to and be hyper-physical with the paint and not have it become precious.

I think of Helen Frankenthaler, Heather Day and Joan Mitchell when I think about mark making. I'm inspired by the stained of the canvases created by Day and Frankenthaler, and the assertive sometimes playful marks of Mitchell. What draws me to these women is how they approach the surface of their paintings. I am interested in how all three, approach control of paint application. What resonates to me about Mitchell is how she worked intuitively, and when creating a painting she sought the feeling of a place. Frankenthaler's fascination with "how edges meet; how accidents are controlled" hold a balance of spontaneity and control in her paintings (Stiles 32). Day has a similar approach, first pouring multiple tests before doing a larger pour on the canvas. Even though the colors are tested and there may be years of practice before approaching the canvas, there is still an element of the unknown and uncertainty. The paint when poured cannot be fully controlled. Both Frankenthaler and Day, try to create control but can never fully be capable of that. I am drawn to that paint process but also to how I consider the subject I am

portraying. This land is out of my control no matter what I do. Taking what I have learned from each of these women, I bring this shared language to my new paintings.

I combine their approaches by incorporating acrylic paint, wax, conte-crayon, charcoal and ink which I've never utilized together before. These paintings were the first time I explored pouring washes, beginning with the surface on the floor. When I begin, I encase a desired border in wax on the surface before I begin my pour. By doing so, I control my initial composition. Each painting starts with this desire of control and the inability to obtain it. My mark making becomes a reaction to this. I shift onto larger paintings of dimensions such as 5'x4' and 8'x6' to get a fully embodied feeling. They achieve a similar height to my own. These paintings are not about the vast expanse of the landscape itself but a bodily reaction to being in it and surrounded by it. I want these to become an immersive experience, really putting the viewer and myself in these created spaces.

CHAPTER III: PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE

While creating these paintings I work from memory with some photographs and watercolors, taken or made in the spaces and used as references. I collect these images together to compile a scene. Much like Peter Doig, the accumulation of these references inspires the magical realism of these places. His distorted realities rooted in art history have been an intriguing inspiration for my work. His approach to the seemingly implausible landscapes opens up the possibility of more than just one world operating, not bound to the restrictions of a single reality. Suggestion of trees, flowers, rocks, bodies of water and sky are used continually throughout my paintings. In *My mother said to pick after the dew has dried*, I moved from just organic shapes to referencing organic matter like grass and seed pods and items found in a meadow (figure 3). These were created through washes and more impasto paint applications. I created a glimpse into the meadow. It foreshadowed the window-like compositions I would develop in later paintings. The grass in the top left of the panel operates as threshold between two places. This was my first glimpse of entering into an inhabitable space through pure paint materiality.

I began thinking of my family members and our relationships as they pertain to these places. I utilized organic matter in *Where do expired hopes go?* to tell a narrative (figure 4). The seed in the center left is settled in shallow ground and is exposed, compared to the seed on the right. The right form has more of a chance to flourish even with impending doom in the sky. The explosive blue ink is ominous and hovers over the forms. This represents a moment in the work where I began to create figurative relations to organic matter, superimposing a human element onto these abstracted organic forms. I think about my own family relations when painting these objects. I depict these figural references with body language more than just the curvilinear associated with abstracted organic matter. Forms face towards one another or may be painted turned away, in isolation or clustered in together. Those seeds represent my brother and me. In relation to this land, he has a higher chance of flourishing, even if the future of this place is unknown. The ground beneath my feet in comparison to him is more unstable, more than he could ever know.

This formative shift in the work of simplified body language through form allows me to dive deeper into my family relationships. By doing this I allow myself to be honest with my thoughts surpassing the guilt of portraying my loved ones this way.

In *We wish we knew where she lay, old Cathead may know but it is silent*, I paint thinking about my brother and our futures coinciding with my family's past. As a child I was taught to forage from the woods (figure 5). We always keep our eyes out for beech tree nuts to collect. I paint thinking of my closest relation simultaneously with a forgotten great, great grand aunt. I have suggested figures by painting beech-tree-yellow ovals. These are first painted together in the bottom right, then one is isolated upstream. These beech-tree-like figures return together in the top panel grown and turned away towards the mountains. Their colors echo through the tree-like strokes throughout the mountain side, camouflaged by rhythmic paint strokes. When looking at the mountain's yellow streaks reveal hidden beech tree relations that are unknown, lost and forgotten due to time. I have begun to identify my selective use of ambiguity in these lines. The identity of these forms become lost in the mountains. Relationships and family history also dissipate and are lost to time. From the interrelationships of my family to my paint applications, these paintings activate an element of the unknown. There is an unknown future for these relationships and for this land. The repetitive lines show that these complex family relationships are nothing new to the mass of all the other trees, relations get lost to time and are forgotten, while the mountains still remain.

Many of these paintings operate with a suggested horizon line. These horizon lines do not always operate as they are traditionally expected. In the painting *We wish we knew where she lay, old Cathead may know but it is silent* the line could function as sky, water, mountains or just pure pigment (figure 5). The selective ambiguity shifts the reality of what is versus what is not known. This operates similarly in most of these paintings, shifting the viewer from known to uncertainty. There is an initial comfort to having a horizon line in a landscape painting, with a horizon line there is the expectation that a tomorrow exists. The sun will set and rise again in the same world as yesterday. I paint with an uncertain future of these landscapes.

CHAPTER IV: INTERNAL SPACE

In *Where do we go from here?* I was thinking about a specific light in between times and events (figure 6). My mother always warned about a green sky before a tornado. The light almost feels like a twilight otherworldly, and warning of danger. Painting on wood panel lends itself to transparency and because of that, internal light. Many of the paintings operate without a distinct light source. This is important for the physicality of the application of paint, but the panel also affects how light operates in these illusionistic spaces. I started the painting with a wash of an acidic unnatural looking green for the ground and of the sky with pigments in the paint not fully mixed. That green is clouded with suspended fragments of pigment. This light isn't determined by the traditional laws of optics of this world. The light is more involved on the ground plane than it is near the suggested horizon line. In the center of the painting, I distorted the foot path for the viewer so that the floating stones operate as unstable. This creates a reorientation of gravity. In most of my paintings I use floating shapes as sources of peace and release. Although peaceful in my newest paintings, I create references to what should be grounding objects, but I create them to be ungraspable. This simultaneously places the viewer between comfort and uncertainty. The very ground for the viewer is unstable. It holds you there in this discomfort.

In *Where do we go from here?* the rock-like forms in the left panel operate as a precipice to a portal (figure 6). This results in visual frustration, because the viewer is given a window yet, upon further inspection, is met with a wall of pure materiality. I coated the oval-like rocks in varnish to give them superficial shine but that withholds description, similar to the experience of, at night, looking out of a window into darkness. The colors in the painting operate differently in those portal-like spaces. The colors are less acidic; the hue is cooler and nods to color relationships in paintings earlier in the series. The blue hue operates as the present while the surrounding acidic colors predict an eerie future where nothing tangible exists to look back on. A hazy reality is punctuated by moments of clarity within these paintings. It creates a dreamlike filter through which to view the work.

Foreboding Conversations operates in a similar way to *Where do we go from here?* (figure 7,6). Working with an unknown light source, static and repetitive marks are covered by a cream washed glaze. This is a deliberate veiling showing beginning layers in the ground plane. The space feels like everything is drifting into the unknown. The off-centered grey translucent stone has a free-falling orientation, simultaneously remaining hovering and still. These shapes and matter have nowhere to go, but they keep moving toward the unknown.

In naming all of these paintings I can echo the warnings of an unknown future while also creating a space for my family relationships. Just like my paintings, I don't want the title to give a full explanation of a place; instead, I hope the title suggests some of the feelings associated with these resonant places. I paint with a relationship and location in mind, but I never know the title until the painting is finished. *We wish we knew where she lay, Old Cathead may know but it is silent* is the only title not completely drawn from my memory (figure 5). A section of its title is taken from a newspaper article about my great, great, grand aunt. My family did not know about her until a recent article was written about hikers getting lost in the Adirondacks. She had gone missing picking wildflowers at my family property and passed away in those woods. She was found many months later. Those are the same fields and woods I ran through barefoot as a child collecting numerous bundles of flowers. That article doesn't sadden me but brought me peace. My mother and I shared a similar reaction, thinking 'What a lovely way to go'. Both of us know one day when we pass, each of us will become part of this land. Each of these titles have stories of home and family that I get to share a glimpse of.

CHAPTER V: WHERE DO EXPIRED HOPES GO?

In *Fathers' moon and their daughters*, I have a similar approach to repetitive forms conveying figures (figure 8). There are three spheres functioning differently. The moon-like orb is warm and near in the bottom of the panel and small enough to hold in the palm of your hand. While the cool-hued orb in the sky is distant, far away and wrapped in a cold embrace. The two oval-like figures are huddled looking at both of these moons. The figures are present for both realities, operating in a warmth with the smaller circle and aware of the cold embrace lingering within a more comforting moment. The figures are oblivious to the sphere and lost in the haze. The two large blue and Payne's grey shapes are about two conversations held simultaneously and staying in two realities. The desire for what was and the known reality of the future: holding onto both but feeling unstable because those thoughts and emotions don't operate in a desired tandem. They foreclose upon hope. Knowing an impending future isn't going to change but still holding out for hope, I want the viewer to be held in that fantastically drawn tension. The paintings occupy and create emotional space as they are informed by the physical landscape.

When I created the most recent paintings, they were prompted by an ineffable feeling in my chest. The moment when you hold too much emotion in your chest, and you can't fully inhale even though you know you haven't fully expanded your lungs. I want these paintings to have that impact. I want the viewers to see how these paintings function in their simultaneity—the complexity of relationships is beholden to more than just one thing. Simultaneously holding both physical and interior space, that which is supposedly stable is simultaneously ineffable. Teresa Murak made a sculpture holding these two realities. She moved earth out of the ground to create a lump. She sits with the lump and its round absence. The earth she uses is everything and nothing at the same time. Each object becomes its own but is forever tied to its origin. Much like how my painting operates, the ties to this land and family will always remain. Even when forms separate and become their own entity, such forms can never fully separate from their past. That simultaneous reality is something I'm searching for and exploring in my own work.

I'm looking to depict a liminal space that exists between place and person. The spaces I seek to depict contain both memory and specific symbolic perception in an emotional present. My paintings draw from my own memories of the place I grew up and coalesces in the deeply forged but fraught relationships between the land and my family. When I was a child, the world was layered, incredibly detailed, very loved and in the future lay a continuum. These paintings represent a clinging to that absolute and ineffable future, while processing the need to move on. In painting, the places become a memory palace of abstracted experience and emotion.

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APPENDIX A. CATALOGUE OF IMAGES



Figure 1. *She sewed her curtains before the road* acrylic, conté crayon, oil and oil pastel on wood panel, 4'x3' 2020



Figure 2. *The pieces you give, pieces you take*, acrylic, conté crayon, oil and oil pastel on wood panel, 4'x3', 2020



Figure 3. *My mother said to pick after the dew has dried*, acrylic, conté crayon, oil, oil pastel and raw pigment on wood panel, 3'x4', 2020



Figure 4. *Where do expired hopes go?* acrylic, conté crayon, ink, oil and oil pastel on wood panel, 5'x4', 2021



Figure 5. *We wish we knew where she lay, old Cathead may know but it is silent*, acrylic, conté crayon, oil and oil pastel on wood panel, (double panel) 8'x6', 2021



Figure 6. *Where do we go from here?* acrylic, conté crayon, oil and oil pastel on wood panel, 5'x4', 2021



Figure 7. *Foreboding Conversations*, acrylic, conté crayon, oil, and oil pastel on wood panel, 4'x3', 2021



Figure 8. In *Fathers' moon and their daughters*, acrylic, conté crayon, oil, oil pastel, and raw pigment on wood panel, 5'x4', 2021